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Consumers should be cautious making Internet food purchases

OLYMPIA – State inspectors with the Department of Agriculture’s Weights and Measures program can be expected to rack up the vehicle mileage as they make their rounds to inspect gas pumps or check on scanner accuracy at stores as part of their mission to protect consumers and businesses alike from inaccurate meters or devices. This time, however, they were able to provide a public service by browsing the Web to gather information on food sales practices on the Internet.

A recent survey by WSDA Weights and Measures officials and City of Seattle inspectors revealed that consumers need to shop carefully. The state survey found that about 20 percent of the sites they visited did not give consumers enough information to make an informed decision.

The law requires many food items to be sold by net weight and the food item should have a price per pound and a total price. When looking at such items as ham and beef on the Internet, inspectors found a wide array of offerings. Some gave a weight range and some estimated the number of servings. For example, an aged prosciutto ham was offered for \$32.95. The stated weight was 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ pounds.

“That meant the ham could cost a consumer between \$13.18 to \$18.83 per pound depending on the size of the ham,” said Jerry Buendel, Weights and Measures program manager.

Another site said their ham would provide between 12 and 15 servings. And yet a third site offering pretzels didn't give the consumer any clue as to how much they were purchasing.

According to Buendel, two main principles govern the method of sale of products.

“First, you must be provided accurate and adequate *quantity* information so you can make a price and quantity comparison. The other is that the quantity must be represented accurately so as not to deceive consumers.”

Consumers should be aware of offerings that state the quantity as “approximately” or “about.” Another set of unreliable terms is “jumbo,” “large” or “giant” – everyone has a different perception of such terms. “Ads that state how many people the product will serve can be misleading because different people consume varying amounts of food and serving sizes are unique to each individual,” Buendel said. “If you are not certain of exactly what you are buying, continue your search or call the vendor directly to get more information before you spend your money.”

Consumers who feel they have been deceived may contact Weights and Measures at (360) 902-1857, in Seattle call (206) 386-1296 and in Spokane call (509) 625-6611.

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